

## Ontological luck

πολυμαθία οὐκ ἔχειν τὸ πάθος<sup>1</sup>

*es hilft uns nicht, wenn wir nicht die Kraft der Einfachheit des Wesensblickes aufbringen*<sup>2</sup>

for these aren't deeds, works, but elections [*Erwählungen*]<sup>3</sup>

Its reaction norm is the range of an organism's phenotypic plasticity.<sup>4</sup> Heidegger sought **the** basis of the ontological constitution of human being. That there is such a constitution is attested by the fact that *das Dasein weiß irgendwie um dergleichen wie Sein*, somehow Dasein is acquainted with the likes of being.<sup>5</sup> Such *Wissen*, the human phenotype's ontologicality, ranges variably across and within persons. Examples will illustrate this variability.

Leszek Kołakowski describes Husserl's project to achieve an "absolutely original," "absolutely primordial" insight into beings. As Kołakowski tells it, Husserl claimed "there is an original insight where things reveal themselves to the consciousness directly." Husserl's phenomenology "wants to offer us access to such an insight," an unmediated insight. By means of the transcendental reduction (perception-purification process) "We uncover, Husserl maintains, a new unquestionable sphere of being (pure phenomena) where nothing is excluded

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<sup>1</sup> This distinction shows up in the objective of the Passover Seder: "One could almost go so far as to speak of a transformation of semantic memory (what we have learned) into episodic memory (what we have experienced)." Jan Assmann, *The Invention of Religion: Faith and Covenant in the Book of Exodus* (tr. Robert Savage 2018) 167-168. Walzer quotes the Haggadah's exhortation to this very transformation: "In every generation let each man look upon himself as if he came forth out of Egypt." Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (1985) 85. The presupposition is that everyone taking part in the Seder has the capacity for the transformation, the pathos, at issue.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe Band 29/30*: 213: <https://www.beyng.com/gaselis/?vol=29.30&pg=213> .

<sup>3</sup> Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul* (tr. Dana Hollander 2004) 48; [https://www.unifr.ch/orthodoxia/de/assets/public/Lehre/FS2023%20-%20Taubes/Taubes\\_Paulus.pdf](https://www.unifr.ch/orthodoxia/de/assets/public/Lehre/FS2023%20-%20Taubes/Taubes_Paulus.pdf) 69.

<sup>4</sup> Phenotypic plasticity is the key theme of the extended evolutionary synthesis. A recent report of *Behmen*-plasticity describes some heretofore vegan squirrels responding to an excess population of voles by hunting and eating them: <https://studyfinds.org/squirrels-turning-into-carnivorous-killers-in-california/> . See generally Theunis Piersma and Jan A. van Gils, *The Flexible Phenotype: A Body-Centred Integration of Ecology, Physiology, and Behaviour* (2011), Carl D. Schlichting and Massimo Pigliucci, *Phenotypic Evolution: A Reaction Norm Perspective* (1998), and Mary Jane West-Eberhard, *Developmental Plasticity and Evolution* (2003). In *Behave* (2017) and *Determined* (2023) Robert Sapolsky reviews the current state of knowledge about the plasticity of *Verhalten*, human reaction norms engaging with environments—contexts, circumstances, situations, histories. Daniela Vallega-Neu observes that a salient component of the human reaction norm is *Stimmung*. "Is it not the case that, prior to all concrete relations to things, attunements or dispositions dispose us toward thinking and acting in ways that may turn out to be destructive or distorting?" For "lived bodies are not simply ecstatic and relational; they are also dense and bear sedimentations of past experiences that mostly escape our awareness. People are not only prone to be overcome by attunements; their bodies bear attunements with them as well." Daniela Vallega-Neu, *Heidegger's Poietic Writings: From Contributions to Philosophy to The Event* (2018) 98, 191. 'The bodymind comes always ancient to its work.' 'the eye,' Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (1968) 7.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Heidegger, GA 24: 454: <https://www.beyng.com/gaselis/?vol=24.00&pg=454> .

from inquiry and where everything gives certainty.” Further, the eidetic insight is “a special kind of direct experience of universals, which reveal themselves to us with irresistible self-evidence,” conveying to the seer “significant structures of which the meaningfulness or the teleological order . . . radiate from the object with imperative self-evidence.” Here

“everything depends ultimately on the quality of the original insight in which things reveal themselves. We aim at nonanalytical certitude. How can we assure ourselves that we have a genuine certitude? Phenomenology provides no answer: either you have insight or you do not. . . . Certitude is in the act of insight, not in discourse. . . . and if one says, ‘I have had the insight, you haven’t,’ the discussion must come to a stop.”<sup>6</sup>

In this account the primordial insight is out-of-range for some phenotypes and not for others. The former encounter the limit of their ontological plasticity short of the insight. Katherine Withy discusses a similar point with respect to what she takes to be the paradigm (modal?) case of “tuning in to the ontological.” It strikes us, she writes,

*“that we make sense of things.* There is no revealed fragility or inadequacy in our understanding of being, and no particular recalcitrant entity, that sets this off. We come to a moment, or a moment comes to us, when we notice or tune into ourselves as understanders of being, and so notice or tune into being itself. This might happen while reading [Thomas] Kuhn or [Jonathan] Lear: it might happen while reading Heidegger. It might happen while walking down the street on a sunny Wednesday afternoon. It might happen [sc. to a particular person] often, or rarely. **It might not happen at all** [my emphasis], in which case, I am one of those people who ‘just don’t get philosophy’ – one of those people who will not, or cannot easily, tune into the ontological.”<sup>7</sup>

The reader senses Withy’s reluctance to say ‘absolutely cannot,’ to say outright that some people can tune in to the ontological and others cannot *schlechthin*. She steers closer in the following passage, veering at the last moment with ‘seem to’:

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<sup>6</sup> Leszek Kołakowski, *Husserl and the Search for Certitude* ([1975] 2001) 33, 36, 41, 45, 50, 51, 52-53. As if: Just as there are antigen-secretors and non-secretors, so also there are transcendental reducers and non-reducers. “Crowell suggests in effect that over the entrance to Heidegger’s Academy should be inscribed: ‘No phenomenological reduction? Don’t even try to get in.’” Thomas Sheehan, “Phenomenology Rediviva: On a recent book by Steven Crowell”: <https://www.beyng.com/docs/Thomas%20Sheehan%20-%20PHENOMENOLOGY%20REDIVIVA%20-%20Revised%20and%20Expanded.pdf> 3.

<sup>7</sup> Katherine Withy, “The Methodological Role of Angst in *Being and Time*”: <https://www.beyng.com/docs/Withy-Angst.html> .

“What is important about angst in [*Sein und Zeit*] is that it allows us to go further in our philosophising (even if we do not do so when we experience it). . . . A genuine openness to the ontological, a certain constellation of matterings and saliences, is crucial for engaging in philosophy beyond a certain point. We notice this most frequently when we teach students or speak with friends who ‘just can’t think philosophically’ – who cannot seem to get themselves into the right headspace. It is this philosophical attitude that Heidegger begins (but ultimately fails) to thematise in the analysis of angst in SZ.”<sup>8</sup>

Again, is the right headspace—a genuine openness to the ontological—is this a region of experience anyone can enter or only some? “Rather than explaining why being must be concealed, or even why we are entity-directed rather than not, Heidegger explains why some of us are more mired in our everyday environmental experiencing than others, and so do not or will not (or would rather not) experience angst and recognise (our) being.”<sup>9</sup> Here *Verfallen* ‘admits of a more and a less,’ and having the right headspace accessible is a matter of . . . what?

Withy characterizes the account of *Verfallen* in *Being and Time* as “instead of explaining why human nature is x, Heidegger explains why some of us are more x than others.” Withy suggests a theological analogy: “explaining original sin vs. explaining why some people are especially sinful.” If it’s licit to extend this analogy,<sup>10</sup> then *Verfallen* is to sinning as *vorlaufende Entschlossenheit* is to deliverance (redemption, salvation) from sin (albeit seldom and fleeting—“wherever you live, it is probably Egypt”<sup>11</sup>). So the theological question—Who gets saved?—has its ontological counterpart: Who gets *Er-eignisized*?

Certainly not all according to Maria Balaska. She notes that Kierkegaard introduced the term ‘spiritlessness,’ *åndløshed*, “to describe an existence that relies solely on the categories of nature and culture to understand itself.” When we regard ourselves, in her words, “only as products of nature and culture” then “we fail to recognize our openness.” She quotes Kierkegaard in support: “the lostness [*Fortabelse*] of spiritlessness, as well as its security [*Tryghed*], consists in its understanding nothing spiritually [*Intet forstaaer aandeligt*] and comprehending nothing as a task [*Opgave*].”<sup>12</sup> “Externally,” Balaska writes, “a life that exercises

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<sup>8</sup> *Id.*

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*

<sup>10</sup> Our warrant might declare that *Alle prägnanten Begriffe der modernen Staatslehre Ontologie sind säkularisierte ~~theologische~~ religiöse Begriffe*. After Carl Schmitt, *Politische Theologie* (1934): <https://www.bard.edu/library/arendt/pdfs/Schmitt-Politische.pdf> 49.

<sup>11</sup> *Exodus and Revolution* 149.

<sup>12</sup> Maria Balaska, *Anxiety and Wonder: On Being Human* (2024) 99-100, quoting *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Oriented Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin* (ed. tr. Reidar Thomte in collaboration with Albert B. Anderson 1980) 95. Kierkegaard’s sentence in its entirety: *Deri ligger netop dens Fortabelse, men ogsaa dens Tryghed, at den Intet forstaaer aandeligt, Intet fatter som Opgave, om den end formaaer at omfamle Alt med sin afmattede Klamhed*. <https://www.kb.dk/e-mat/dod/111408014975-bw.pdf> 103.

openness and is directed to possibility may not look very different from a spiritless life. . . . because this kind of life [opened-up] is not easily defined by specific observable facts, traits or activities. However, the orientation of their lives is shifted, and the overall tone is different [sc. from that of the spiritless ones].”<sup>13</sup> Anxiety and wonder, per Balaska, “share both the unsettling sense that the flow of one’s life is suspended for no apparent reason and the more joyous sense that we have access to something bigger, beyond our everyday lives.”<sup>14</sup> She quotes approvingly Kierkegaard’s explanation that one who boasts of never having experienced anxiety is ‘very spiritless,’ *meget aandlos*.<sup>15</sup> Anxious wonder “may be rare,” she concludes, “but what is even rarer is the attempt and **the capacity** [my emphasis] to understand it in the light of our existence, to recognize in it an insight about who we are and what we are for.”<sup>16</sup> She’s claiming that most people simply cannot do this. Most ontological reaction norms are *aandlos*, lacking this *seltene Kraft*.<sup>17</sup>

Richard Capobianco quotes the following passage as “a valuable clue to the later Heidegger’s manifold reflections on Being,” indeed “the ‘secret’ to reading the later Heidegger”:

“The *mysterious* moment of the undivided unity of intuition and feeling, the one being nothing without the other [***Geheimnisvoller Augenblick der ungegliederten Einheit von Anschauung und Gefühl, die eine ist ohne der andere nichts***].”<sup>18</sup>

And again from a letter Heidegger wrote to Elisabeth Blochmann in 1929:

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<sup>13</sup> *Anxiety and Wonder* 103.

<sup>14</sup> *Id.* 3.

<sup>15</sup> *Skulde derimod den Talende mene, at det er det Store hos ham, at han aldrig har varet angest, da stal jeg med Glade indvie ham i min Forklaring, at det kommerderaf, at han er meget aandlos.*  
<https://www.kb.dk/e-mat/dod/111408014975-bw.pdf> 178.

<sup>16</sup> *Anxiety and Wonder* ix. »Eigentliche« Angst ist . . . selten. *Sein und Zeit* 190:  
<https://www.beyng.com/pages/de/SeinUndZeit/SeinUndZeit.190.html> .

<sup>17</sup> Accord Kripal: “There are certain human capacities, like precognition, which most people will never know—*can* never know—not because this is a piece of data that they haven’t been told but because they would not believe such a thing *even if they were told*. Why? Because they do not have this ability. Accordingly, they *cannot* know this truth. It is simply not them. . . . Thinking impossibly is not possible for everyone—and not for superficial or accidental reasons but for neurodiverse or spiritual reasons. . . . it is a way of thinking that requires either the personal experience of actual *gnosis* (of the fundamental unity of the human and the cosmos) or a deep hermeneutical sympathy for the gnostic realization of others.” Jeffrey J. Kripal, *How to Think Impossibly About Souls, UFOs, Time, Belief, and Everything Else* (2024) xii, 217. (italics in original)

<sup>18</sup> Richard Capobianco, “Heidegger’s ‘Mystical’ Vision of Being,”  
[https://www.academia.edu/125801011/Heideggers\\_Mystical\\_Vision\\_of\\_Being](https://www.academia.edu/125801011/Heideggers_Mystical_Vision_of_Being) 3, 11 (2024); quoting GA 60: 322:  
<https://www.beyng.com/gaselis/?vol=60.00&pg=322> . *Anschauung* and *Gefühl* are different experiences. What dimension enables this difference? “According to Heidegger, then, Kant conceives of transcendental imagination as the common root of pure sensibility and pure understanding, such that their respective transcendental structures can only be explained in reference to this foundational faculty.” Simon Truwant, *Cassirer and Heidegger at Davos* (2022) 94.

“The truth of our existence is no simple thing. Correspondingly, this inner truthfulness has its own depth and manifoldness; it does not consist solely in the settling of rational considerations. It needs its day and hour in which we have the whole of our existence. Then we experience that in all its essentials our hearts must remain open to grace. God—or however we shall name it—calls everyone in a different voice . . .”<sup>19</sup>

The need for this mysterious moment—transrational, transformative *Anschauung und Gefühl*—appears again at the beginning of the *Beiträge*:

*Nicht mehr handelt es sich darum, »über« etwas zu handeln und ein Gegenständliches darzustellen, sondern dem Er-eignis übereignet zu werden, was einem Wesenswandel des Menschen aus dem »vernünftigen Tier« (animal rationale) in das Da-sein gleichkommt.*<sup>20</sup>

The *Wesen*-transformative moment, Capobianco insists, is a matter of grace. Glossing Heidegger on Trakl Capobianco says “A spiritual transformation has come upon us. Indeed, this ‘blessing’ is a joyful happening (an *Ereignis*, we might say) and not something that we have earned or merited in any way. It is purely a gift to be received.”<sup>21</sup>

In this latest essay Capobianco once again documents “the spiritual or ‘mystical’ Heidegger that, regrettably, many commentators overlook or avoid (or simply do not comprehend).” (Like Withy’s *Angst*-balkers who “do not or will not (or would rather not).”) He documents “the manifold ‘mystery’ that abounds in the later Heidegger’s thinking;” *viz.*, that “Being is favorably inclined toward humans and offers us the ‘grace’ of ‘the saving Holy’ that heals us by reassuring us despite the deepest wounds of this mortal existence.” In words relevant to our present concern (Who gets *Verwandel*ed?) Capobianco supposes “that one must share in a kind of mystical seeing to appreciate [Heidegger’s] own seeing, that is, his ‘intuition and feeling.’” In Heidegger’s terms, one must have a heart open to grace. Capobianco immediately adds that “we need not perfectly understand [Heidegger’s] vision of Being to appreciate it and find it

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<sup>19</sup> “Heidegger’s ‘Mystical’ Vision of Being” 4 (Capobianco’s italics omitted).

<sup>20</sup> GA 65: 3: <https://www.beyng.com/gaselis/?vol=65.00&pg=3> . “The issue is no longer to be ‘about’ something, to present something objective, but to be appropriated over to the appropriating event. That is equivalent to an essential transformation of the human being: from ‘rational animal’ (*animal rationale*) to Da-sein.” *Contributions to Philosophy (of the Event)* (tr. Richard Rojcewicz and Daniela Vallega-Neu 2012) 5. The word *Verwandlung*, Sheehan observes, “is a constant drumbeat throughout Heidegger’s work, a call to personal and social transformation.” Thomas Sheehan, “Rewriting Heidegger,” May 13, 2023: <https://www.beyng.com/papers/HC2023Sheehan.html#VOLLZUGSSINN> .

<sup>21</sup> “Heidegger’s ‘Mystical’ Vision of Being” 9.

compelling.”<sup>22</sup> Appreciable and compelling but in cases of heart not open to grace unshareable. Yet again, Who has a heart open to grace? Not everyone. A few.<sup>23</sup>

Just as, in Simon Critchley’s account, Christian mysticism is not shareable by the plain-minded. “I think I am temperamentally a mystic,” he tells us; “I feel very drawn to this sort of experience and this mode of conceptualizing. . . . Skepticism is not an instinctual or default response for me.” The exaggerated negativity of mystical texts, like that of Meister Eckhart’s, “makes them frustrating,” he says, “irritating even, to those plain-minded skeptical readers out of step with this way of thinking.” “In mysticism, it is contradiction that has to be lived. Of course, living such contradiction will make no sense to the skeptical or plain-minded. But this book is not for them.”<sup>24</sup> Well, I read it anyway, for its contribution to *Seinstychologie*.

Critchley excels in portraying what Bunyan named the Slough of Despond.<sup>25</sup> This topos is why, I suppose, our various covenants with God have always seemed such a good deal for us. So Jan Assmann writes of the Mosaic that

“The covenant is the great turning point from prehistory to history. From now on, everything done within the covenant will have consequences according to whether it pleases or displeases God. With that there emerges a new chronotope, a site with its own, linear temporality, in which all causes inexorably give rise to their effects, a context of meaning that allows even the worst catastrophes to be understood as just punishment and thus safeguards against chaos, senselessness, and despair.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> *Id.* 21-22.

<sup>23</sup> Capobianco writes at *id.* 16, “As [Heidegger] himself puts it, what he was seeking to bring to light about Being was ‘intimated by only a few’;” citing GA 73.1: 877: »*Es konzentriert sich bei uns alles auf’s Geistige*« —*das ist keine historische Feststellung einer Tatsache der damaligen Zeitlage, sondern ein denkend-dichtendes Nennen eines im Seyn selbst verborgenen Ereignisses—das weit hinaus langt in das Kommende, das nur wenige, oder vielleicht nur der, der es sagt und denkt, zu ahnen vermögen.* <https://www.beyng.com/gaselis/?vol=73.10&pg=877> .

<sup>24</sup> Simon Critchley, *Mysticism* (2024) 69, 91, 252.

<sup>25</sup> Critchley writes, “Ecstasy is what it feels like to be alive when we push away the sadness that clings to us. And sadness does cling to us. Reality presses in on us from all sides with a relentless force, a violence, which drains our energy and dissipates our capacity for belief and for joy. The world deafens us with its noise; our eyes sting from the ever-enlarging incoherence of information and disinformation and the constant presence of war. We all feel, we all live, within the poverty of contemporary experience. This is a leaden time, a heavy time, a time of dearth. As a result, we feel miserable, wretched, anxious, bored.” *Mysticism* 5. “And he said unto me, this *miry slough*, is such a place as cannot be mended: it is the descent whither the scum and filth that attends conviction for sin doth continually run, and therefore it is called the *Slough of Despond* for still as the sinner is awakened about his lost condition, there ariseth in his soul many fears and doubts, and discouraging apprehensions, which all of them get together, and set in this place: and this is the reason of the badness of this ground.” John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim’s Progress from This World, to That which is to come* (1678).

<sup>26</sup> *The Invention of Religion* 187-188.

Such vaccine “flows into you like a good wine,” as Taubes puts it, “the idea that God doesn’t play dice [*daß Gott nicht Würfel spielt*];” the faith that existence is no crapgame; the denial that it’s ‘*Entwürfelspiel*’ through and through. Taubes goes on, “And no one dares to ask: Perhaps he does play dice?” Because

“Paul’s God does play dice. He elects and condemns. In the Calvinist form this is a game of dice. One is born to election and born to damnation. Okay, it’s much more complicated, but in principle it is indeed the case that election is a game of dice [*daß Erwählung Würfelspiel ist*]. And we—just as the pot can’t ask the potter—can’t ask why he created us this way.”<sup>27</sup>

No more than we can ask *Seyn* why we’re thrown this way, why some people can ‘tune in to the ontological’ and others—insightless, balky, *aandlos*, access-denied, nongnostic, heartshut, plain-minded, skeptical, the many and vulgar—cannot. We **can** remark that whereas ‘adaptation’ translates ‘*Ereignis*’ in some of its aspects,<sup>28</sup> the aspect we are considering here might be translated better, provisionally, as ‘election.’

Election as Paul understood it; *viz.*, “For he saith to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.”<sup>29</sup> ‘All others get lost.’ Taubes deemed himself a Paulinist<sup>30</sup> and said, in his last year of life, “Nietzsche has been my best teacher about Paul.” He quotes a sentence from the *Nachlass* and comments, “Whoever has understood this has understood more of Paul and of Augustine and of Luther than can be found on this subject [*Erwählung*] in normal exegesis.” I.e., has understood this:

“All deeper people are of one mind about this—Luther, Augustine, Paul come to mind—that our morality and its events are not congruent with our *conscious will*.”<sup>31</sup>

In other words, Taubes says, “they all understand that the ego doesn’t call the shots [*nicht am Steuer sitzt*] in human beings. That the autonomous human being, the I, doesn’t call the shots, but that behind him there are forces at work that undermine the conscious will. They don’t overcome it, but undermine. That is, if you want to express it in a formula, that in the I there is a profound powerlessness [*profunde Ohnmacht*].”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> *The Political Theology of Paul* 84-85.

<sup>28</sup> “Adaptation (*Ereignis*)” in *The Cambridge Heidegger Lexicon* (ed. Mark A. Wrathall 2021) 19-30.

<sup>29</sup> *Romans* 9: 15 (KJV), quoting *Exodus* 33: 19.

<sup>30</sup> “Now I of course am a Paulinist, not a Christian, but a Paulinist.” *The Political Theology of Paul* 88.

<sup>31</sup> *Id.* 87. *Alle tieferen Menschen sind darin einmüthig — es kommt Luthern Augustin Paulus zum Bewußtsein — , daß unsere Moralität und deren Ereignisse nicht mit unserem bewußten Willen sich decken — kurz, daß die Erklärung aus Zweck-Absichten nicht reicht. Nachgelassene Fragmente-1885* 1[55].

<sup>32</sup> *The Political Theology of Paul* 87.

To adapt Heidegger’s habitual formula: ‘It is not we who roll the bones.’ At all scales *Ereignis* is stochastic, a game of uncountably many shooters and dice, ἀστραγάλοι ὄ’*Ereignisses* εἰσὶν μανίαί τε καὶ κυδοιμοί.<sup>33</sup> And with that emendation the notion is classical, as Bernard Williams recounts it:

“There has been a strain of philosophical thought which identifies the end of life as happiness, happiness as reflective tranquility, and tranquility as the product of self-sufficiency – what is not in the domain of the self is not in its control, and so is subject to luck and the contingent enemies of tranquility. The most extreme versions of this outlook in the Western tradition are certain doctrines of classical antiquity, though it is a notable fact about them that while the good man, the sage, was immune to the impact of incident luck, it was a matter of what may be called constitutive luck that one was a sage, or capable of becoming one: for the many and vulgar this was not (on the prevailing view) an available course.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Poor luck that *Ereignisses* for Ἐρωτὸς spoils Anacreon’s meter. *Poetae Melici Graeci* (ed. D. L. Page 1962) 398 p. 199.

<sup>34</sup> Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973-1980* (1981) 20. One of his criticisms of Kantian morality is that it presupposes a non-stochastic essence: “The purity of morality itself represents a value. It expresses an ideal, presented by Kant, once again, in a form that is the most unqualified and the most moving: the ideal that human existence can be ultimately just. Most advantages and admired characteristics are distributed in ways that, if not unjust, are at any rate not just. And some people are simply luckier than others. The ideal of morality is a value, moral value, that transcends luck. It must therefore lie beyond any empirical determination. It must lie not only in trying rather than succeeding, since success depends partly on luck, but in a kind of trying that lies beyond the level at which the capacity to try can itself be a matter of luck.” Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985) 195.